

making world cities

by michael goldman and wesley longhofer



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In the spring of 2007, someone moved to a city. The move was a momentous one in terms of its demographic implications—it marked the tipping point of a new urban century in which more than half the world's population now lives in cities.

Most metropolitan growth is occurring in cities of the global South, such as Guangzhou in China and Johannesburg in South Africa, where the populations are expected to double over the next three decades. It's imagined these "world cities" will be the sparkplug needed to kickstart national economies and catapult them into the global marketplace.

How things have changed. Back in the 1980s, scholars and analysts considered these cities too chaotic and a drag on national economic growth. There was too much overcrowding, too much violence, and too many public health crises. International finance institutions portrayed these places as "mega-cities" that posed megaproblems for the economic potential of poorer countries. Hence, the World Bank and the regional development banks directed their loans and policies away from cities and toward specific industries and infrastructure such as dams, power plants, and highways.

Since the early 1990s, though, beginning with sociologist Saskia Sassen's *The Global City*, we've witnessed a substantial "urban turn" in scholarly and policy emphasis. Global or world cities are now believed to be key sites from which the global economy will derive its ingenuity and energy.

In the global South, select cities promise to be catalysts for their national economies, too. Indeed, many scholars and analysts envision the Bangalores and Shanghais to be globally competitive in their own rights, propelling their slower-moving countries to the top of the global economy. And the World Bank leads the way, shifting its lending priorities toward these cities and priming them for an economic boom by financing various global-city solutions.

Although cities in India and China have become pivotal players in the global economy, issues and problems abound. For one thing, world-class airports and cutting-edge architecture aren't tides that lift all boats. Projects like these often lead to mass displacement and mounting inequality. For example, the "Shanghai miracle," according to geographer Fulong Wu, occurred on the backs of millions of urban residents forced off their land and out of their social and economic networks.

What's more, judging Shanghai or Jakarta by the same

criteria as New York and London underplays the complexities of world city-making in the global South. In many of these cities, urban dwellers are struggling to make cities for themselves through transnational circuits of capital, labor, and ideas that connect diverse cities across countries and regions. These processes reveal not so much a singular set of world cities, but a diverse "world of cities" that includes London and Tokyo, but also Kampala, Istanbul, and others.

Take, for instance, the city of Bangalore in southern India.

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Over the past two years we've conducted fieldwork on how world-city projects take shape in this hotspot of globalization. We've found that making world cities involves much more than turning Bangalore into the next Singapore. Rather, Bangalore is part of a circuitry of world city-making processes that determine the contours of the city. From real estate speculators in Dubai to Muslim traders on the Indian coast, these "worlding" processes transcend the limits of any single city.

the (re)making of bangalore

World-city boosters and poverty-fighting experts have converged in Bangalore hoping to capitalize on its booming software industry to drive the Indian economy. The "Silicon Valley of Asia" boasts the highest growth rate in India, with some of its most profitable software companies recording 40 percent growth and profit rates in recent years. Famously, it was on a Bangalore golf course overlooking the offices of Microsoft and IBM that author and *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman discovered the "world is flat."

No longer is Bangalore known merely for its outsourcing and call centers—it's imagined to be a glimpse into India's plug-n'-play future. Its iconic image as a new "world city" has attracted worldwide acclaim. Professional circles from China to Scotland have adopted the "Bangalore model" of urban planning in an effort to hitch their own national economies to key cities like Dalian and Glasgow.

However, to elevate Bangalore into the elite club of world cities like London and New York, the local city must be upended.

The Shanghai financial district skyline, pictured here several years ago while still under construction, contains two of the tallest buildings in the world and a third is under construction that will be taller still.



Photo used with permission

Software professionals bike or walk to work on the state-of-the-art Infosys campus in Bangalore, which features open space, cafés, golf greens, and a gymnasium.

Meeting the demands of the Microsofts and Googles of the world has required billions of dollars in loans from international banks to transform its feeble infrastructure so it can provide world-class services. Doing so also requires thousands of acres of land on the city's periphery currently occupied by hundreds of thousands of villagers and farmers.

And the challenges facing urban planners and development professionals in Bangalore are great. Big city traffic clogs its small town roads. Water and power shortages occur daily, and waterborne illnesses due to overflowing sewers happen all too frequently. (The average citizen receives water from the

that will attract foreign investment, as well as keep Indian companies in town. One illustrative example is the highly anticipated international airport that opened last spring (the previous airport—the third busiest in India—was an old military airbase). The government granted enough subsidized land to the Siemens and Unique Zurich-led consortium to build an airport one-and-a-half times the size of Heathrow in London. Yet, the airport opened with only one runway. The remaining land is being acquired to transform the surrounding area into high-value gated residential communities, seven-star hotel complexes, medical tourism hospitals, and business centers.

From the airport, consultants and investors will (eventually) hop on a state-of-the-art monorail system and zip down to the IT corridor, a parcel of land the size of Paris that houses Indian and foreign call centers and software firms. Throughout the expanding metropolitan area, the World Bank and Asian Development Bank are lending for major water and sanitation improvements, road upgrades and expansions, and overhauls of the government sector with new laws and regulatory bodies.

Overcoming rising congestion and a lack of space has led to greater spatial expansion, as well, making Bangalore one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the world. Part of

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city for a few hours every third day.) Inequality between the rich and poor has risen five-fold since the software boom began in the early 1990s. Local activists and researchers claim that anywhere from 25 percent to 45 percent of its population (now nearing 7 million) lives in informal, slum-like settlements.

To overcome these problems, Bangalore has undergone the financing and construction of “world class” infrastructure

this expansion has been the construction of a six-lane expressway connecting Bangalore to the second-largest city in the state, Mysore. The Pennsylvania-based firm in charge of constructing the expressway has planned five privately-owned townships alongside it, complete with shopping malls, tourist attractions, and corporate campuses. Yet, such world-city-making projects are only possible by paving over vibrant rural economies and livelihoods.

sidewalks of resistance

As billions of dollars are poured into highways, private townships, and the new airport, resistance from local Bangaloreans continues to mount. On a sunny Sunday this past November, hundreds of residents marched to protest the widening of streets and felling of trees for the new elevated Metro system. Bicyclists claimed that tearing down more than 90,000 beautiful shade-producing trees ruined the appeal of what was once known as India's "garden city." Shop owners and concerned citizens pushed for the Metro to be built underground so businesses wouldn't be shuttered to make way for it. Advocates for the poor argued that widening roads would turn sidewalks, where so much daily commerce and social interaction occurs, into prime real estate. Purge the city of its street vendors and sidewalks, and you've stripped the life out of the Indian city.

Widening the streets to make room for a world-class Metro system is one of the many consequences of lifting Bangalore to its high expectations as a world city. The six-lane Mysore expressway is expected to displace 200,000 rural denizens alone, according to local activists. Consequently, activists and neighborhood groups have staged protests and demonstrations to protect their city from the growing inequality and mass displacement associated with world-city projects.

On some level, such resistance is familiar given the history of displacement and gentrification that made way for city-making in other parts of the world, including top-tier cities like Paris and New York. Yet, not all resistance is "local." For example, a mostly Muslim trading community in Kerala, where similar projects are taking place, has quietly "occupied" urban plots cleared for real estate speculation. By setting up their own relationships with small commodity-producing towns in eastern China, the traders sell goods to people who can't afford to shop in the luxury malls sweeping across the cities. In doing so, urban residents have made their own versions of a "world city."

This network of traders selling goods made in China points to a complex global circuitry of world city-making that also includes banks, real estate developers, migrant workers, and software companies. To examine one world city in isolation overlooks these interurban connections from which world cities are made and resisted. And thus, to better understand

Bangalore, observers and scholars, including us, inevitably follow the connections to other cities such as Singapore, Dubai, and Shanghai, to name a few.

world city circuits

Scholars of global or world cities have often highlighted their similarities and connections to one another. Cities like London and Tokyo comprise key nodes in an emergent global economy, particularly as centers of financial capital and high-end services. This has led to a hierarchical view of global cities that defines lower-tiered cities by the *absence* of qualities found in the first-tier. As geographer Jennifer Robinson points out,

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such a framework pushes most cities "off the map" that many sociologists use to make sense of urban life.

Rather than thinking of cities in terms of hierarchies, or within what scholars call a core-periphery model, cultural anthropologist Aihwa Ong suggests it's better to think of them as parts of lateral circuits that move across national boundaries. These circuits include high-end financial transactions, such as those between Wall Street and London, as well as interurban networks of labor and resistance that are particularly emblematic of city-making in the global South.

Much of the research on world cities continues to focus on elite financial circuits, such as those that run through India's software sector. As one project manager at Infosys—the second largest software company in India—told us, today 98 percent of the company's work is business from outside India, and 65 percent is from the United States.

"Let's just say, when you buy a book online, we do it," he joked.

In a fascinating bit of role reversal, the chairman of Wipro, another successful Bangalore-based IT company, recently told *The Wall Street Journal* he was looking to set up hubs in American "states which are less developed," such as Idaho and Virginia.

However, the currents and circuits of these global cities run well beyond software and finance. Many of the farmers and workers displaced by world-city projects like the airport or expressway end up in the city's growing slums. But some others take up low-wage construction jobs overseas, typically in Dubai, under what Human Rights Watch calls indentured and slave-like conditions.

Ironically, people displaced by real estate speculation at home end up producing wealth for real estate firms in Dubai, which in turn is invested back in Bangalore, only to displace



Photo by Wesley Longhofer

A boy walks along a storm drain in a slum near the wealthy neighborhood of Koramangala. While clean water gets pumped to the international airport, most of the city lives with fetid open sewers and waterborne illnesses.

more people like them. The overflowing market of construction workers keeps wages down and profits up in Dubai, while back in India, surpluses from real estate investments are financing other world-city projects in Shanghai and Singapore.

Not coincidentally, many people who live in these cities have begun to challenge these “worlding processes” through their own interurban circuits, in order to reclaim and remake their city in their own image rather than the imagined one of world-city boosters. In his work on African cities, urban scholar AbdouMaliq Simone argues it’s actually the Africans marginalized by failed world-city projects who mobilize “the city as a resource for reaching and operating at the level of the world.” We find the same thing happening in Bangalore and across India where elite world-city policies have catalyzed alternative sets of social relations for the poor majorities struggling for sustenance within these rapidly changing urban environments.

One of the most effective responses to such widespread dispossession is the National Alliance of People’s Movements (NAPM), the largest grassroots social movement in India today. NAPM has tapped into the collective ire fomenting across villages and cities where vulnerable communities are being swept aside in the tide of world-city projects and special export zones. As the power of Indian trade unions, farmers’ organizations, and progressive political parties have weakened considerably over the past decade, NAPM is organizing the dispossessed and forcing the public to reconsider the allure of real estate speculation as the driving force of city planning.

cities that thrive

In other words, the making of a world city like Bangalore entails a variety of interurban connections, ranging from real estate speculation to labor migration to “world-city” models to social-movement organizing. However, to rationalize the world-city imperative in order to build more gated communities and elite transport systems only focuses on one of these circuits—the most visible and expensive one that connects Bangalore to the top-tier cities through real estate and capital. It entails seeing Bangalore or Lagos or Jakarta through the lens of an imaginary European metropolis and not through the eyes and lives of their rural and urban denizens.

As long as we perpetuate old myths about the “mega-cities” of the global South as stagnant and helpless, and frame the rise of stellar industries such as IT as “saviors,” we risk being blinded by their fleeting glimmer. Cities like Bangalore have always been more vibrant and complex than we’ve assumed. And it’s their vibrancy that’s challenging the displacement and inequality that comes with billion-dollar loans and world-class infrastructure.

Perhaps a world city could be one that takes care of its non-elite inhabitants first, and refuses to unbundle itself so that every burst of human energy, parcel of land, and urban space gets diverted to global circuits of capital. The potential consequences of the big move in 2007 extend far beyond its demography—remaking the new urban century around elite-based “world cities” paves over the importance of urban life that actually sustains the majority. When the imagined spark-plugs of the “new” global economy overshadow lived urban experiences, city leaders risk planning an urban landscape devoid of a place people can call home.

recommended resources

David Harvey. *The New Imperialism*. (Oxford University Press, 2005). A collection of incisive essays from one of the foremost theorists on cities, politics, and capital.

Aihwa Ong and Ananya Roy. *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*. (Basil Blackwell, Forthcoming). An edited volume that innovatively thinks through recent trends in world city-making across Asia.

Jennifer Robinson. *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development*. (Routledge, 2006). An engaging call for a cosmopolitan urban studies that takes seriously the dynamics of a “world of ordinary cities” rather than just world cities.

AbdouMaliq Simone. *For the City yet to Come*. (Duke University Press, 2004). A beautifully written set of essays on how marginalized Africans “make” their cities.

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